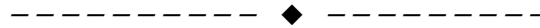


Idea Transformation between L1 and L2 as a Writing Problem for Kurd EFL Learners at different University Levels

Areen Ahmed Muhammed, Chalak Ali Mohammed Ameen

Abstract—Idea transference from First Language (L1) to Second Language (L2) is considered as a major problem of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Many EFL learners are vulnerable to the negative effect of L1 on their L2 learning. Composing in L2, as one of the four skills of second language learning, is considered as one of the problematic skills for EFL learners that needs much effort and trials by the learners; thus, it is thought to be worth of investigation and research. In this paper, the researchers attempt to identify the writing problems of Kurd EFL learners and specifically the idea transferring problems from L1 to L2 while composing in L2. And consequently, suggest solutions for the problems raised and identified.

Keywords— Idea transformation, Direct translation, Academic writing, L1 affect on L2.



1 INTRODUCTION

The effect of L1 on learning L2 has been an interesting subject in the field of Second Language Research (SLR), and still is, since the past few decades. Moreover, linguists and methodologists do not completely agree about the impact of L1 on L2 learning. There are some different, sometimes contradictory, views about this issue. Additionally, Lado (1957) believed that second language learners almost completely rely on their mother tongue in the process of second language learning; whilst many years later, Dulay and Burt (1974) had doubts about negative transfer as a major factor affecting L2 learning. They were under the impression that the mother tongue is not that important; consequently, not worth of further investigation.

In Ellis's view, during the 1950s and 1960s "there was a strong assumption that most of difficulties facing the L2 learners were imposed by his/her first language" (1985:6). As a result of this, the teachers were encouraged to concentrate on finding out the areas of similarity and differences in both languages, which was then called "Contrastive Analysis", so that they can be used to enrich the students' knowledge about both languages and to be facilitative in learning L2 consequently (ibid:7).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

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One simple evidence to prove the effect of L1 on L2 learning could be justified in the way that L2 learners have already achieved experience and habits in learning and using their mother tongue. Moreover, it is with these linguistic tools they come to classroom to learn the L2. Therefore, some terms will be defined for further illustrations:

Transference: Transference, also called 'cross linguistic influence', has been defined differently and from different perspectives. According to Richards et al. (1992) "transfer is carrying-over of learned expression and structure from previous learning to new learning situations"; whereas, Dulay et al. (1982) define interference as "the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language". Furthermore, Ellis (1997:51) defines transference as "the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2". Thus, any effect on L2 learning that is traced back to L1 is considered as transfer.

Recently, different types of transference are numerated; as transference from L1 to L2 is considered to be a two dimensional factor that can affect L2 learning. In other words, L1 may contribute in L2 learning positively or negatively. In addition, Ellis (1985:6) believes that if there is concordance between L1 and L2, then positive transference occurs. On the other hand, negative transfer takes place when there is disagreement between the two languages. Furthermore, Dechert (1983) believes that the further apart the two languages are in structure, the more traces of L1 transfer would be noticed, which, then, lead to errors.

Firstly, Positive transfer: In some situations, L1 can facilitate L2 learning. This will occur when the two languages are identical or semi-identical in some structures. For example, if "SVO" (subject + verb + object) is a sentence pattern in both languages, then it helps the L2 learner to form sentences in this way, consequently, it facilitates in learning and using L2 and L2 learning will take place with little or no difficulty. Moreover, 'avoidance' can be classed as another positive attribution of L1. By avoidance, it is meant the evasion of using some constructions/structures that exist in L2, whilst they do not exist in L1. Empirical evidence shows that Chinese and Japanese L2 learners do not tend to use 'relative clause' as it does not have equivalent structure in these two languages. As a result, the L2 learners of these languages make fewer mistakes in relative clauses than Arabic learners of English (Ellis, 1997:51).

Secondly, Negative Transfer: Negative transfer is defined as "errors in the learners' use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue" (Lott, 1983:256). Likewise, Brown (2007:263) agrees fully that "inter-lingual transfer is a significant source of errors for all learners". Besides, he states that the learners who are in the beginning stages of L2 learning are vulnerable to L1 negative transfer. Brown also argues that "in these early stages, before the system of the second language is familiar, the native language is the only previous linguistic system upon which the learner can draw" (ibid). Thus, L1 transfer is quite common, especially in the early stages of L2 learning, but with the passage of time and the learner's progress it could be decreased as the learner would be acquainted with the linguistic system of the second language.

Negative Transfer in different skills and fields of language: Negative transfer occurs in different fields of language. An example of Kurdish English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner's difficulties in phonology could be the mispronunciation of the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in words such as think and that. They usually replace /θ/ with /s/ and /ð/ with /z/. In the Kurdish language, these two fricative dental consonants do not exist, thus correct pronunciation of these sounds is really difficult and problematic. Another example of negative transfer could be due to Syntactic structure's disagreement between the two languages; consequently, it may lead to the occurrence of errors. For example:

• Deřom bo mařewe. (Latin Kurdish)	• I go to home. (English)
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The obvious reason behind committing such a mistake is that in Kurdish the preposition (Bo) is the equivalent of the preposition (to) in English. As according to Beardsmore (1982), many of the difficulties that L2 learners face in

phonology, vocabulary and grammar are due to L1 interference as the L2 learners, especially in the beginning stages, follow the rules.

Regarding the four skills (listening-speaking-reading-writing) of languages, L1 transfer may affect all of them negatively; especially the productive skills that are speaking and writing as they are output skills. Since the focus of this paper is on L1 negative transfer on writing skill, thus writing skill would be tackled.

Kurdish EFL learners might be vulnerable to L1 negative transfer, whilst performing their writing skills. Many reasons could be behind committing mistakes such as the difference between the two languages in word order, sentence patterns, punctuation marks ...etc. Different researchers investigated L1 negative transfer within different cultures and contexts. As Sasaki and Hirose (1996) in their research investigated the factors that might influence the Japanese students while composing in English. The result of the research showed that the weak and novice writers use translation from L1 to L2 more than the good and proficient writers. Moreover, Bhela (1999:25) conducted a research about L1 negative transfer on writing skills. Her participants consisted of four students: Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Italian students. The result of the research showed interference of L1 structure in writing in L2 that led to the production of erroneous and inappropriate piece of writing. The result also clearly showed that the participants in their writings "adopted their L1 structures to help them in their L2 texts" (ibid:30). Furthermore, Wolfersberger (2003) conducted another research regarding the use of writing strategies by the L2 learners while composing in L2. The results showed that some L1 writing strategies are transferrable to L2 writing. It was also shown that students with lower abilities could not use all the strategies that may help in writing in L2. Thus, several compensating strategies were suggested to be utilized while composing in L2.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Validity and Reliability

The research tools used in this study are regarded as valid tools for achieving the overall aims and objectives of the study. The reliability and validity can be observed on the basis of the following:

The key number for validity is 30 participants for the questionnaire. The data were collected from different students of different stages (classes) in order to achieve the collection of further data from different Kurdish students so that the research question could be answered.

2. The data were collected from three academic years' students, out of four; since stage one was excluded because

the survey was done in the beginning of the year and the students had just attended the university.

3. One Quantitative research method (questionnaire) was used and it was conducted at university of Sulaimani in Kurdistan region of Iraq.

4. The questionnaire was formulated by the researchers; later, some instructors from the University of Sulaimani were asked to revise the items in the questionnaire to avoid obscurity in the wording and content of the final version.

Finally, the methods were approved based on the book by Zoltan Dornyei (Research Methods in Applied Linguistics, 2007).

3.2 Context and Research Questions

The study is conducted at the University of Sulaimani / school of education - Chamchamal / English Department students (n=30), and all instructors are English non-native speakers. The standard range of students per class is 40-45. The teachers ask the students if they have any academic problems, and in the following lessons, they will discuss them. Moreover, oral and written feedbacks are given to the students' writing by their teachers.

Based on the literature review, the following research questions have been formulated, in order to achieve the purpose of the study:

1. What are the major, secondary and minor factors for Kurdish students' idea transformation and direct translation?
2. What are the causes of these problems?
3. What recommendations, if any, do the researchers have for the practice of the students' writing skill to study at an English-medium Universities in the Kurdistan and Iraq?

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Methods

In the field of researches, there are various instruments of data collection. Different methods are used in different occasions and contexts by different researchers. The use of these methods may depend on many factors such as time constraints, cost, number of participants, ethics, place of conducting the research ...etc.

3.3.2 Questionnaire

As questionnaire is a beneficial method of collecting data and it is broadly used by researchers. It often provides structured and numerical data (Wilson and McLean, 1994 cited in Cohen et al., 2007: 317). According to Richards and Lockhart, "surveys and questionnaires are useful ways of gathering information about affective dimensions of teaching, such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences" (1996:10). Similarly, in Cohen et al.'s view, the advantages of the questionnaire are the reliability of the

data, because it is anonymous; it encourages honesty in the participants' answers and it is more economical than interview with regard to time and money and it can be mailed (2007:351). Likewise, the use of questionnaire may lead to gaining quantitative, numerical, reliable and easy to compare data (Cohen et al., 2007:351).

3.3.3 Piloting

Piloting is defined as the process that researchers test their research techniques and methods to find out to what extent they are practicable, and if necessary, modify the plan (Blaxter et al., 2006:137). Piloting is of paramount importance; as in Bell's view, all data collecting instruments should be piloted to check the usability of the data gathered (2005:147). Moreover, the pilot has several functions; such as: "increasing the reliability, validity and practicability of the questionnaire" (Oppenheim,1992; Morrison, 1993; Wilson and McLean, 1994:47 cited in Cohen et. al.,2007:341).

Hence, for this study, the questionnaire was piloted and it was of high benefit. It helped the researchers to check the clarity, validity, ambiguity and readability of the statements and questions and to get a feedback on leading questions and to know the time that is needed to complete the questionnaire. Through conducting the pilot, the researchers were able to spot some vocabularies which were difficult to the participants and some statements were omitted or redrafted as they were somehow vague for the participants. All in all, some statements of the questionnaire were redrafted in order to give more clarity and validity to the participants.

Finally, the questionnaire is the only quantitative tool, which has been used to collect the data. Questionnaires were given to Kurdish students (n=30) who study at the English Department / School of Education – Chamchamal / University of Sulaimani. The questionnaires consist of two parts; the first part aims to collect some background information about the students' previous academic/educational background and the environment that they came from. The second part aims to identify the students' major and minor factors behind the idea transformation and direct translation; and how language transformation occurs. In addition, it identifies the factors underlying their problems and the improvements they have seen since they began studying at the English department.

4 FINDINGS: PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results and Findings

4.1.2 Questionnaire Results and Discussion

For the background questions of the survey, the participants were asked many enquiries, whilst the most influential ones are illustrated here. Firstly, the students were asked if their teachers are native or non-native. The result has shown that, the students do not have English native teachers at all. Secondly, almost all of the students (n=28) attended the public secondary and high school; and their subjects (apart from English and Arabic) were all taught in Kurdish completely; even though during exam time Kurdish language was the only language of writing. By contrast, only two of the students studied the subjects in English language in a private sector, which they wrote their exam answers for all the subjects in English. The result has revealed that all the students are grown in a non-native environment, in which this is one of the main factors behind students' direct transformation in academic writing. Moreover, the students have been asked to indicate the hours they study academic writing and receive instructions, one third of the students have given the response of "more than two hours". However, almost the other one third (n=7) has given the answer as "none". Lately, eighteen of the students in another question indicated that they write on their own topics when the teachers asked them to do so. Finally, they have been asked whether they converse with English native speakers or not; almost (% 40) of the students answered with "sometimes", whilst (% 3.3) of the students answered both "always" and "usually" respectively; and the rest (% 53.3) never communicated with English Native Speaker (ENS). Consequently, the students' fewer chances to practice their English in a native environment made them face difficulty in English writing and caused the direct transformation of ideas from L1. This could be supported by the works of Marinova-Todd, et al. (2000:27), Burns (2003:127), Moyer (2007:511), and Shively (2008:110).

The second sector of the questionnaire illustrates the students' troubles about writing and direct transformation of ideas, factors behind those direct translations, and the achievement of the students' writing since they started at the medium of university. The fossilization of some transformation from their Mother Tongue (MT) to their Target Language (TL) is another issue since in their early age of learning it could be hard to adjust them easily. First of all, this section of this part discusses the major, secondary and minor factors for Kurdish students' idea transformation and direct translation. The students were asked about their MT, whether it has a direct influence in composing in TL. In answering this statement, (% 63.3) of the participants honestly agreed with the situation; however, only (% 36.9) said that they never use their MT ideas in writing TL. Secondly, the students were asked to numerate and list their main problems; the

problems were numerated as six different choices. The students' serious problem in writing was grammar, in which almost half of the students (n=14) ticked the box as their first and main problem. Both organizing and styling were considered as their second and third problems, which (% 13.3) voted for them. Later, each of the choice of vocabulary and content problems were reported as their fourth and fifth dilemma; only small numbers of the participants (n=3) chose these two sections. In contrast, the least number of the students (n=2) have problems with mechanical issues during writing. In contrast to their first choice, researchers took the participants' sixth choice also as further illustration. The (% 23.3) of the participants' main choice for statement number six was academic style of writing. Later, each of grammar and content problems hit the second places (% 20) for each. Thirdly, vocabulary and structuring were considered as fourth and fifth problems for eight of the students. Finally, only three students voted for mechanical issues as their sixth choice. Further determination can be seen in Figure (1).

The next question of the survey announces the factors behind students' problems. As it can be seen in figure (2), the factors can be indicated as follows:

Status of English and Non-native environment is scaled as the non-competent factor to affect their L1 to L2 transformation and direct translation. In which twenty-two of the students graded the both factors as their primary and secondary causes. In addition, the use of Kurdish language inside the class and the few opportunities to write in TL illustrated as the third and fourth factors, which (% 30) of the participants chose each one of them. Moreover, the "weak foundation" and "lack of interest and motivation" are scaled as the mid factors for their problems. Additionally, only one student believed that the main problem for his/her difficulty is the lack of teaching methods.

Furthermore, another question was asked, in order to show the level of students' writing for both languages. The result found that almost half of the students (n=13) transfer part of their ideas from their MT, whilst there were no students in the survey without any transformation; but only five participants stated that they transfer the minimum ideas from their MT to write in TL. Still all the students use their Kurdish ideas to write in English; besides, one third of the students were agreed that they received beneficial feedbacks from their teachers. The frightening issues concerning the academic writing in English were indicated for the students. The criterion in which the majority of the students are afraid of during English academic writing is the rules of grammar; in which more than half of the participants (n=16) chose it. Secondly, each of punctuation and spelling, and knowledge about the context hit the

second and third places, which (n=13) and (n=10) of the participants selected them respectively. Finally, each of “organizing, vocabulary, and style” is the least concerned for the students; in which it was (n=9, 8, and 6) of the participants selection.

From figure (3) it can be concluded that the participants were asked to agree or disagree with some statements to identify some problems. For the first question, more than two third of the students (n=21) approved that they can write on any topic in English, but the rest disagreed with the given statement. And almost two third of the participants (n=19) can use wide range of vocabulary in writing.

Finally, the students (n=24) showed that they have seen good improvements since they studied at university. By contrast, some other students (n=6) did not learn so much in writing. And the main activities for their writing were assignments, essay, and report writings.

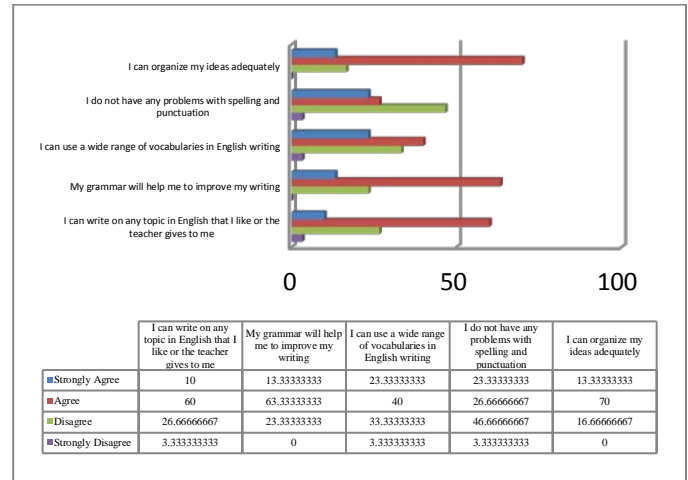


Figure 3. Kurdish Students' Opinions on English Academic Writing in Percentage

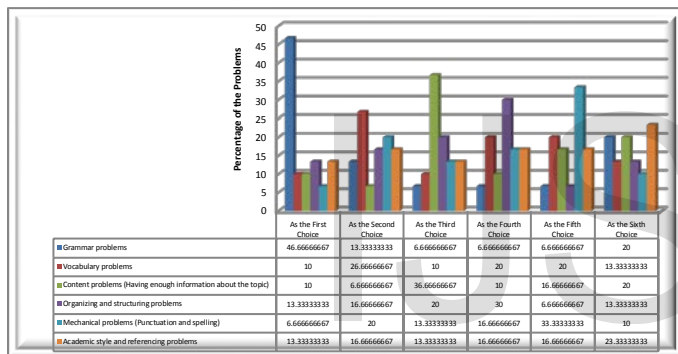


Figure 1. Major and Minor Problems in English Academic Writing that Causes Idea Transformation

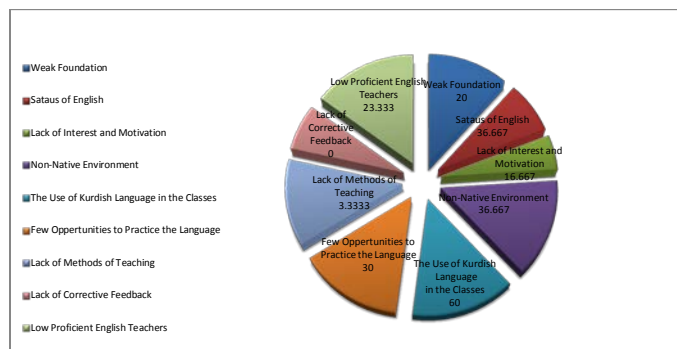


Figure 2. Causes of the Problems in Percentage

4.2 Discussion of the Main Findings

4.2.1 The Major, Secondary, and Minor factors for Kurdish students' idea transferring

As shown in the questionnaire, the most and major problems for the Kurdish students in general is grammar rules; and the students chose it as their first choice and main problem. This problem is the main issue in idea transformation, since the students are not very good in English grammar and they try a direct translation of the ideas to save their time and self. Perhaps Kurdish students did not learn in a practical environment; their knowledge is limited due to the limited curriculum and they have only three hours of composition in first year and three for Essay in third year in a week during the four academic years. Moreover, Derwing et al. (1997:7) state that classroom observation, written assignment and practical environment could be the best way to achieve a better writing with avoiding transformation.

Through the data, it can be concluded that “punctuation and spelling” is their secondary problem due to the lack of sufficient practice. A study by Celce-Murcia et al. (1966:44), Pei (1966:120), and Burns (2003:75) explain the situation. It is believed that, usually Non-Native Speakers (NNS) pay much more attention to one component of a language during writing; such as: grammar, punctuation, or mechanic, and ignore the other issues. As a result, when they write, due to the high concern about their grammar and punctuation, they are unable to think in English; therefore the idea transformation occurs in most parts of the essay.

Additionally, knowledge about the content is considered as another point in their transformation to be discussed. In contrast, style and referencing is considered as the minor problem which affect transformation and direct translation.

However, through different choices of the students, different results might be obtained, while these are the approximate result. The reasons are obvious; their weak foundation could be a factor. As it will be mentioned lately, the Kurdish students' major and minor problems are due to not only one factor; but also the education system and non-native environment play crucial roles. Factors such as the few opportunities to practice the language and lack of assignment writing are obstacles for the students to improve the academic writing. The students' mistakes in the use of the English written language are due to the absence of such opportunities.

4.2.2 The Causes of the Problems

Kurdish students as any other NNS suffer from writing difficulties, direct translation and idea transformation during their academic writing. These difficulties are formed from the direct and indirect factors. For the direct factor, status of English non-native environment, few opportunities to write and practice the language, and the lack of classroom assignments and essay writings are the main factors; as each of Suter (1976:242), Sparks and Glachon (1991:12), Celce-Murcia, et al. (1996:120), and Gilakjani (2012:120) illustrate the idea through their studies. In contrast, each of weak foundation, lack of interest and motivation, lack of methods of teaching, and lack of corrective feedback will affect the writing indirectly; and may not show a direct transformation, as shown in the above figures.

4.2.3 Suggestions and Recommendations

For the majority of the students writing practicing is considered as a good and beneficial way for improvement. Moreover, they mentioned that students should read different sources and read continuously to stop transformation from MT, as each of Gilakjani (2012:125), Marinova-Todd et al. (2000:29), Masgoret and Gardner (2003:207), Bernaus et al. (2004:84), and Gatlinton et al. (2005:509) agree upon the idea. Overall, all the suggestions include the ideas of practicing, classroom writing, essay writing, read and later write on different topics are to stop idea transformation between two languages; and help the students to think in TL.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions and Main Findings

To conclude, as it is indicated, writing, especially academic one, is one of the most difficult skills of a language for foreign learners. Through a total-learning process, anyone

can improve his/her academic writing. Writing subjects is an important issue in communicative competence, especially in the university levels. Moreover, the teachers should be a tutor, than just the feedback giver, and then through this aim the learners achieve the goal, which they are trying for.

To sum up, the study's main objective is to investigate the Kurdish students' problems with transformation of the ideas from their MT to TL or a direct translation of the expressions. The researchers have tested the students at the University of Sulaimani / School of Education-Chamchamal / English Department in order to answer the research questions of the paper. Through the study, the findings have explained two major points: Firstly, the students' major, secondary, and minor problems have been reported. Their major problem is with the grammar rules and that problem derived them to transfer the ideas from their natural language to English. Moreover, their secondary problem is punctuation and spelling. Furthermore, problem lies in organizing, structuring and styling has minor affect of language transformation. Secondly, the factors of their problems were highlighted, which are the lack of enough practice with their writing and non-native environment. Finally, practicing accounted as the solution to help the students' writing.

5.2 Implications of the Paper

Idea transformation is demonstrated as a vital component of writing. English non-native students should work harder to achieve improvement. Many Kurdish students face difficulty when they write in English. Moreover, practicing appears to be a good solution to heal the problems, as was admitted by the students themselves.

In conclusion, the findings of the research should be recognized as important implications for further researches in the field of second language writing. Moreover, the problems faced by Kurdish students in terms of idea transformation and direct translation of the ideas need further explanations and investigations. The implications and validities of the findings are limited; therefore, the research needs further exploration with a larger number of students and the use of case studies on the students to reveal their improvements in writing over time. To achieve a further exploration and a broader explanation of their problems, a larger number of participants should participate in the study. Further investigation with a bigger sample is needed on a larger group of students to extend and generalize the validity of the research.

Moreover, the curriculum and course materials are the most important criteria to avoid transformation. Secondly, the class should be student-centred. Finally, the students' direct translation from their MT should be identified and

the learners should be facilitated to improve their academic writing. This could be done through focusing on the ideas of the students when they write an academic essay in English. Furthermore, students should be motivated to interact more and socialize more with English native speakers, and practice more on different issues to write about and ask for feedbacks.

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